

# Psychological Well-Being in Elite Performance: Exploring Female Broadway Singers' Experiences Through Self-Determination Theory

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## Abstract

The technical mastery, sophisticated artistry, and reflective awareness of elite singers position them as valuable contributors to music performance science research. This exploratory study examined the lived experiences of seven female Broadway performers, seeking to understand how they navigate the artistic, psychological, and professional demands of contemporary musical theatre. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, interview data generated four themes: *Instinct, Intention, and Endurance in Performance*; *Linking Artistry to Empathy and Emotional Healing*; *Confidence, Loss, and Persistence*; and *Everyone's Replaceable: The Normalization of Silence, Power Imbalance, and Trauma*. Viewed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, the analysis highlights how performers' accounts illuminate connections between autonomy, competence, and relatedness and their ongoing motivation and resilience. These findings offer insight into the psychological and artistic realities of elite female Broadway performers. They underscore the importance of professional environments that support performers' basic psychological needs, not only to sustain personal well-being but also to enhance the durability and quality of artistic output in a demanding industry.

## Keywords

Contemporary musical theatre, elite performers, motivation, psychological needs, singing

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Eight shows a week, Broadway singers step into the spotlight and deliver performances that demand extraordinary singing technique, sustained dramatic intensity, and disciplined creative control in high-pressure settings. Behind the curtain of effortlessness lies a finely tuned system of physical, cognitive, and psychological coordination, shaped by broader social and cultural contexts that intertwine with performers' lived experiences (Cohen, 2019; Forbes, 2024). Fully grasping the intricacy of singing requires examining its technical, emotional, and psychological components as an interconnected system in which the body and mind function in seamless coordination within the performance environment. Elite singers are ideal subjects for performance science research, not only because their automatized cognitive and motor skills enable deep engagement with artistic and expressive nuance but also because they can offer articulate and insightful reflection

on their practice (Holmes & Holmes, 2013) (see also Forbes, 2024; Forbes & Cantrell, 2023).

Musical theatre, particularly on Broadway, holds significant cultural prominence as a cornerstone of the global arts and entertainment industry (Simonoff & Ma, 2003). Although scholarly interest in the American musical has increased, critical analysis remains underdeveloped (Knapp et al., 2011), with limited attention to the lived experiences

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of the performers who embody and sustain the Broadway tradition. Despite Broadway's reputation as the pinnacle of musical theatre and a defining milestone in a performer's career (Bradshaw & Cooper, 2018; Mink, 2024), a review of more than 10 academic databases revealed no qualitative research focused exclusively on verified Broadway performers until 2025 (McAllen et al., 2025). That foundational study offered the first in-depth examination of this population, employing reflexive thematic analysis of data from 36 participants. The present study extends and deepens that work through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of seven highly skilled performers drawn from the original participant pool.

Although studies have included Broadway artists as participants, they have primarily focused on acoustical, physiological, or medical aspects rather than on the lived experiences of singers or the psychological dimensions of performance (Bradshaw & Cooper, 2018; Crosby et al., 2025; Flynn et al., 2020; Lebowitz & Baken, 2011). Previous studies used recordings (Becker & Watson, 2025; Kayes & Welch, 2017), examined students or teachers (DeLeo LeBorgne et al., 2010; LeBorgne, 2001; Roll, 2014, 2016, 2019; Zuim et al., 2021), or involved participants who had been in regional theater or touring performers without confirming Broadway credentials (Bourne & Garnier, 2011; D'haeseleer et al., 2022; Maxfield & Manternach, 2018; Phyland, 2014; Stone et al., 2002). The current study offers a novel contribution by foregrounding the voices of female Broadway performers recognized as experts by experience, all of whom have reached the highest tier of the musical theatre profession. Examining this elite cohort through the lens of Self-Determination Theory advances understanding of psychological self-efficacy in high-achieving musical theatre artists and addresses a critical gap in the literature.

## Background

### *Broadway's Vocal Demands: Framing the Study*

As the commercial music theatre industry has evolved, demanding conditions have shaped vocal practices, requiring singers to balance stylistic versatility with vocal health (Thomas & Alexander, 2025). In this context, the ability to sing in "mix" has become a central approach, widely used in practice and often required of singers in casting notices. Despite this, the objective parameters of singing in mix are debated in pedagogy and science. Before presenting the findings and discussion of this study, it is necessary to provide some brief background on this term, acknowledging that mix is somewhat controversial in voice science and pedagogy, and will be unfamiliar to readers outside these fields.

Mix is understood as a coordination bridging chest and head qualities, often described as combining perceptual and physical attributes (Kochis-Jennings et al., 2012; Miller, 1986). This coordination allows singers to produce

high notes with the strength of belting but with reduced strain—an ability now essential for most Broadway roles (Bourne & Garnier, 2011; Edwin, 2009; McAllen et al., 2025; Roll, 2014). Accordingly, and in line with the phenomenological focus of this study, we adopt the position that mix is something *perceived* by the singer (see Cox et al., 2024, p. 50, who use the phrase "perceived registrational blend" to refer to mix). In this study, Broadway singers' self-perceived ability to mix is considered within their broader lived experience.

### *Self-Determination Theory*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) offers a framework for understanding how the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (*autonomy*, or the need to feel in control of one's actions; *competence*, or the need to feel effective in one's endeavors; and *relatedness*, or the need to feel connected to others) shapes motivation and supports *psychological well-being*, which is associated with a sense of vitality, fulfillment, and overall mental health. These needs are considered universal and inherent, making SDT broadly applicable across diverse professional domains (Evans, 2015). SDT also emphasizes that motivation is most effective when it is internally driven and aligned with an individual's values and sense of self (Evans, 2015). When these psychological needs are satisfied, individuals are intrinsically motivated and do not require external pressure or incentives to take action (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Importantly, SDT also explains what hinders motivation. When these basic needs are thwarted, people may adopt compensatory behaviors that offer only superficial relief at a psychological cost. Unlike physical needs, unmet psychological needs can lead to adaptive responses such as compliance (avoiding conflict), defiance (resisting expectations), or amotivation (disengagement) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Though initially adaptive, these responses can become ingrained, ultimately impeding personal growth and undermining autonomy. Over time, this misalignment contributes to diminished motivation, increased stress, and poorer well-being. While SDT has been widely applied in education, sport, and community music-making, its application to elite performers remains limited. This study, therefore, takes an exploratory approach, using SDT as a lens to interpret the lived experiences of elite singers performing on Broadway.

### *Exploring the Role of Self-Determination Theory in Music*

SDT has been widely applied in music research, with studies consistently showing that fulfilling basic psychological needs promotes flourishing and sustained artistic engagement. In education and performance settings, environments that nurture these needs foster greater practice,

performance, and life satisfaction, while those that thwart them can lead to burnout and disengagement (Bonnevill-Roussy et al., 2013; Bonneville-Roussy & Evans, 2024; Quedsted, 2010). In participatory and therapeutic contexts, musical engagement (often through flow experiences) has been linked to belonging, motivation, life satisfaction, and psychosocial well-being (Koehler et al., 2023; Krause et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2016; Ngobeni, 2024). SDT-informed environments have also been linked to increased music class enrollment and stronger student investment by fostering a sense of competence and value (Colpo, 2024; Freer & Evans, 2019). Despite these robust findings, a notable gap remains in SDT research on elite performers, particularly singers, where the psychological dynamics of high-level artistic environments have yet to be explored in depth.

Addressing this gap is particularly important given that women in the professional music industry continue to face challenges rooted in historical discrimination and societal bias (Smith & Hendricks, 2022). Research consistently shows that female musicians report higher levels of performance stress and anxiety than men (Bonnevill-Roussy et al., 2017), alongside systemic barriers in the psychosocial work environment, including greater work demands and more frequent stress symptoms (Holst et al., 2012; Johansson & Theorell, 2003; Perrier et al., 2025). Gaining a deeper understanding of women's musical engagement in this context is crucial for advancing equity and fostering meaningful change in the industry (Hruska & Bonneville-Roussy, 2022).

## Aim and Research Questions

This study investigated the lived experiences of elite female Broadway performers, focusing on how they navigate the artistic, psychological, and professional demands of sustaining a high-level career in contemporary musical theatre. Rather than examining vocal technique in isolation, the research took a holistic approach, exploring how singers describe the interplay of technical, emotional, and contextual factors that shape their work. Centering the perspectives of those who have met Broadway's rigorous vocal demands, the study sought to understand how performers experience and make sense of their professional lives, with particular attention to well-being, motivation, and resilience. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. How do elite female Broadway singers describe and make sense of their lived experiences in relation to the artistic, psychological, and professional demands of performance?
2. How do elite female Broadway singers' experiences of performance, motivation, and well-being align with the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)?

## Method

While quantitative studies identify patterns and measure variables, qualitative research is essential to capturing the lived experiences of singers, the social and environmental factors shaping performance, and the deeply personal nature of their craft. In the performing arts, such approaches illuminate how artistic engagement evolves through creation, reflection, and sharing, resisting reductive, mechanical interpretations of singing (Sardella, 2024). Despite their strength in addressing performer complexity (Holmes & Holmes, 2013; Williamon et al., 2021), qualitative approaches remain underrepresented.

There has been a recent push for singing voice research to better represent the voices and lived experiences of singers, countering the predominant positivistic approach (Cox & Forbes, 2022; Forbes, 2024). Existing studies tend to focus on pedagogy or instruction, often neglecting the insights of practitioners (Carson, 2024) and overlooking the lived experiences that illuminate the complex nature of elite performance (Holmes & Holmes, 2013). This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach that explores personal experiences through semi-structured interviews, enabling rich, in-depth accounts (Smith et al., 2022). IPA is particularly well suited to examining the complex experiences of elite performers, whose perspectives are rarely centered in research.

The study is grounded in interpretivism and realist ontology, assuming that objective realities exist independently, while analysis focuses on how individuals interpret those realities (Willig, 2016, 2022). Interpretivism values individual perspectives shaped by culture, context, and time, offering greater depth and sensitivity than positivist approaches (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Because of IPA's idiographic commitment, IPA studies often yield both convergent and divergent findings (Smith et al., 2022).

## Participants

Participants in this study were female Broadway performers selected from a previous qualitative survey of 36 singers (McAllen et al., 2025). Seven were chosen for the depth of their reflections and alignment with the current study's focus. Eligibility required at least one Broadway performance credit, self-identification as highly skilled in singing with a mixed voice, and consent to a follow-up interview. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

## Data Collection

Data were gathered through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted in October and November of 2024. Participants were asked about technical insights into achieving and maintaining their voices, addressing aspects of vocal mix, the emotional and physical

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Pseudonym	Age range	BFA in musical theatre
Sylvia	46–55 Years	No
Thalia	26–35 Years	Yes
Helena	36–45 Years	No
Vera	46–55 Years	Yes
Rhea	36–45 Years	No
Britney	36–45 Years	No
Selene	36–45 Years	No

For the purposes of this study, a Broadway role was defined as any credited onstage role performed in a Broadway production, including principal, ensemble, and replacement roles.

Note. Collectively, participants have performed 96 Broadway roles, averaging 14 roles per performer.

experience of performing at an elite level, career-specific challenges, and external influences on their vocal work. In line with IPA, feelings, thoughts, embodied actions, and personal demonstrations were considered meaningful elements of each participant's subjective perspective (Smith et al., 2022). Interviews ranged from 60 to 120 min, were conducted in private settings, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service.

### Researcher Reflexivity

IPA is guided by a double hermeneutic: Researchers interpret how participants make sense of their experiences, while also reflecting on their own interpretative role. This reflexive stance highlights the shared humanity between researcher and participant and foregrounds the researcher's active role in meaning-making. IPA also emphasizes idiographic depth, requiring a small, homogeneous sample for detailed, case-by-case analysis (Smith et al., 2022). While some of the challenges explored in this study may resonate with performers of other genders, the decision to center on female Broadway singers reflects a deliberate focus on a gendered experience within a historically patriarchal industry. It also acknowledges the distinct demands placed on women in musical theatre, including the roles written for them and the vocal and emotional expectations those roles entail.

The interviews were conducted by the first author, a New Jersey-based voice teacher with 30 years of experience specializing in training singers pursuing or sustaining careers in musical theatre. This background fostered rapport and a collegial atmosphere, enabling high-level discussions of productions, roles, songs, and technical elements, with participants confident in the interviewer's familiarity with their references. This supported rich discourse while maintaining critical self-awareness and interpretive sensitivity. The second and third authors, both established singing voice pedagogues and researchers in contemporary commercial music, contributed conceptual insights and guidance during data interpretation and manuscript preparation.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the six-step IPA process outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Transcripts and recordings were reviewed multiple times by Author 1 as the primary analyst for full immersion. Exploratory notes captured linguistic, conceptual, and observational insights for each participant. Interviews were analyzed independently, with line-by-line coding used to develop descriptive and interpretative notes. These were synthesized into personal experiential themes (PETs) by identifying patterns and key concepts. A cross-case analysis then generated group experiential themes (GETs), highlighting both shared and unique elements. An interpretative narrative was constructed to integrate these insights across cases. Theoretical concepts were not imposed during analysis; only after the themes were developed was SDT identified as the most appropriate interpretive lens, consistent with IPA's inductive, idiographic, and contextual approach.

## Results

### *Instinct, Intention, and Endurance in Performance*

When asked why they chose to participate in the study, participants pointed to their specialization in and appreciation of the vocal mix, which they described as central to contemporary Broadway singing. Several hoped to contribute to a clearer understanding of it, with one performer calling it "deeply misunderstood." While eager to offer their perspectives, the data revealed no unified method for achieving a well-coordinated mix. Notably, participants made minimal use of scientific terminology in their responses, an observation that aligns with previous research on Broadway singers (McAllen et al., 2025), which found a noticeable lack of engagement with established scientific and pedagogical terminology. Instead, they emphasized the instinctual nature of their work, prioritizing intuitive, embodied knowledge over technical language. Vera described herself as being "born with a mix," or more precisely, "a glorious mix," which came naturally before formal training at a prestigious musical theatre conservatory. Although that classical training deepened her understanding of the voice, she felt she "lost something"—the natural ease of mixing and belting she had initially possessed. This reliance on instinct over technicality was echoed by other participants. Sylvia, who described her childhood voice as sounding like a "laser beam," recalled that her first voice teacher's approach to singing emphasized freedom and exploration over a prescribed method. Selene emphasized, "I'm much more going off of instinct, going off of what it feels like," adding that when it comes to learning to mix, "most people just figure it out for themselves." Rhea echoed this, saying, "My body just knows what it's doing," and recalled working with a classically trained singer who struggled by overthinking: "They were thinking about the science so much that they were no longer just singing."

This emphasis on intuitive, bodily knowing aligns with recent findings by Zamorano et al. (2025), which suggest that heightened interoceptive accuracy in professional singers may enable the instinctive adjustments required for mixing, supporting the idea that vocal coordination can arise from embodied awareness rather than formal instruction. Britney's methods also supported this theme, using metaphors like "walking through the trees" or "wearing a big helmet" to connect with the desired sound. Thalia takes a mimicry-based approach, saying, "You just listen and do it!" citing influences like Idina Menzel and Sherie Rene Scott. Her gleeful remark, "Let's see who we can fool!" captured the ease and spontaneity with which she connects to her vocal influences.

Participants described the "Broadway mix" as distinctive because of how they integrated it with character and text (McAllen et al., 2025), a perspective consistent with Hoch & Edwards's (2018) observations. Helena, trained in both opera and musical theatre, distinguished the two, stating that in musical theatre, "The narrative takes over." Rhea considers factors like age, tempo, and emotional complexity when making vocal choices: "It really does inform that sound and where that mix lands." Britney notes, "I use it for everything. I can get a ton of emotions coming out of it." Sylvia likened the Broadway mix to an expanded range of vocal colors, proudly saying, "I have the 36-color crayon box as opposed to the 12-color crayon box." Thalia noted its versatility across roles and historical styles, calling the mix a "door-opener," emphasizing its crucial role in her success.

All participants framed the Broadway mix as a survival strategy, expressing frustration with modern compositions that ignore the practical limitations of the female voice. Sylvia noted, "People are composing for the theatre and they don't really understand the voice," leaving the singer anxiously wondering, "how am I going to get through it?" Rhea criticized the demands for women to belt E5s and F5s as "ridiculous," arguing that compelling writing does not require pushing singers to the top of the staff. Britney described the pressure of performing eight times a week: "How many power ballads can this one person sing ... while wearing a six-pound dress and a three-pound wig and a hat?" Vera recounted that she avoided using her mix for one of Broadway's most notoriously difficult roles due to pressure from the creative team. She "was getting away with a full belted throat F" until her voice gave out and she sustained significant vocal damage. Thalia offered a similar perspective, recalling that in her first Broadway show, she felt pressured to belt instead of mix, admitting, "Every Sunday night my voice was gone. Every. Single. Sunday." Rhea also voiced concern about the industry's poor technical vocabulary, noting that many casting teams and directors couldn't distinguish between mix and belt. This, she argued, limits creative choices and frustrates performers: "Please send it to them in big capital letters. GUYS, GET YOUR TERMINOLOGY RIGHT."

Participants' experiences reveal that the Broadway mix is an intuitive vocal practice rooted in embodied knowledge, functioning as both a vocal technique and a survival strategy for navigating the demanding intersection of artistic expression and professional sustainability.

### *Linking Artistry to Empathy and Emotional Healing*

An unexpected yet recurring theme among these Broadway performers was the centrality of empathy, a quality not directly tied to vocal technique but deeply influential in both professional and personal contexts. Many described empathy as a vital creative tool that enhanced their ability to embody diverse characters while fostering authentic connections in their personal relationships. Helena explained, "When you work on a character, you develop compassion for that character," even when the character is morally complex: "You're playing horrible people sometimes... and you need to reconcile yourself with doing—why am I doing what they're doing?" Thalia reflects, "How can I empathize so much with a person who's not me that I can embody that person in front of a bunch of strangers, and they're going to think that's me?" Vera called empathy "so underrated," adding, "It makes you a better actor, and it makes you a better singer. It makes you a better human." As Britney put it, "An actor's job is connecting with people and understanding people."

This empathetic approach extends beyond the stage. Helena noted that touring, collaborating, and living with new people fosters everyday compassion: "You have to stay open." Vera echoes this: "The lesson of being in New York City is that we have to evolve with how the world is evolving." Thalia's compassion for others is profound; she earnestly prioritizes human rights over professional success, asserting that her integrity is "not for sale." Speaking with passion, she declared, "The most important thing is your humanity, your own integrity, and what you did with your time on the earth." Sylvia, Selene, and Rhea emphasized their commitment to advocacy, with Rhea explaining, "You have to stand up for others once you're in a position to be able to do that." She added, "Use that voice to better the world and better yourself." When Vera teaches musical theatre classes, she emphasizes the importance of protecting others, warning students that unkindness will meet her "wrath." Helena and Britney both noted that the theatre world is filled with "Very, very kind people" and that resistance to diversity would make it difficult to thrive in such a space.

Participants also described their artistic practices as pathways to emotional healing. Thalia called musical theatre her "medicine," crediting it with saving her life during a suicidal period at age 12. For her, this personal association with healing was a defining part of her experience: "I love the way it heals people; I love the way it healed me." She shared that losing the ability to express herself through music and dance would feel like "death." Vera considers healing her "duty," saying, "I care a lot, and sometimes it

spreads me way too thin, but that's how I feed my own soul." Sylvia, described by others as a "healer," quietly affirmed, "That is always what it has felt like," linking her performance work to her wellness advocacy. Rhea reflected on storytelling as a powerful source of healing for her, while Britney shared that her purpose in life is to "bring joy" and "help people." Helena noted that several of her friends transitioned from the arts into mental health work, highlighting the connection: "They're quite connected ... the study of behavior, the study of others, the study of themselves." For these performers, life is guided by authentic connection, where influence stems from empathy and emotional expression—not merely success on stage.

For these participants, empathy emerges as a golden thread that connects technical skill, artistic authenticity, and social conscience, suggesting that for Broadway performers, vocal excellence and empathy are inextricably linked.

### *Confidence, Loss, and Persistence*

The participants' accounts were marked by a striking sense of confidence and self-assuredness, often expressed alongside moments of vulnerability and loss. Their confidence is rooted in internal validation rather than external approval. Rhea asserts that audience reactions do not define her worth: "The audience can respond, or not—it doesn't matter." Sylvia echoes this: "I don't need that response to know I'm still doing something of quality," and dismissed indifference during auditions with, "Those people don't know what's good." Helena muses, "Even if the feedback I receive is less than enthusiastic, I'm like, I don't know what *you* were watching." While it may be assumed that stepping in as an understudy for the lead in a production poses challenges, Thalia sees it differently: "This isn't the 'poor man's version' of the song. This is a rare version—one you only get to experience because it's coming from me." Selene echoed this grounded confidence, "I'm not going to apologize for being here tonight. You get me, and I'm awesome."

For many, this confidence stems from a complex, deeply personal relationship with their voices. For these performers, the voice brings joy and pride; it also leaves them vulnerable to loss. After the unexpected closure of her Broadway show, Britney stopped performing, saying, "I can't do this anymore." The loss felt as if her "life was taken away." Though she eventually returned, the experience revealed how career instability can shake even the most seasoned performers. Vera described the pressure of starring in a notoriously demanding role as "the weight of the world on your shoulders." When her voice faltered, she spiraled: "Tail spinning every morning, waking up, is my voice there? Oh my God, oh my God..." She shared, "I've never felt so alone in my life," consumed by fear that her "career is over." She mourned the need to approach singing cautiously, something she had never done before. Selene also described her voice loss as "Terrifying. It was

terrifying," haunted by the uncertainty, "Is it coming back? When will it come back?" When Rhea faced vocal injury for the first time, the disorientation was all-consuming. "I was lost," she said.

Despite these challenges, all these performers have persevered, regaining trust in their voices and rebuilding confidence. Vera now describes her relationship with her voice as a source of joy: "Now I'm in the happiest relationship. I never, ever, ever worry." Rhea echoes this: "I absolutely know it's there for me. I trust it inherently." Thalia emphasized the intimacy of that connection: "It's private, it's mine, and no one can tell me this relationship doesn't exist."

This kind of resilience emerged as a defining trait among the performers. Sylvia called it a "fool's confidence," saying, "There is no chance of survival if you hear no and accept that at any time." She compared herself to Uma Thurman's character in *Kill Bill*, who punches her way out of a coffin: "You give me an obstacle? No you don't. I will break the obstacle." Summing up her philosophy: "I think there are two kinds of people in the world. One is a person who hears no and says, 'okay,' and one is a person who hears no and says, 'Fuck you. I'll tell you who says no.'"

For this cohort of performers, artistic confidence is not the hubristic absence of doubt but the hard-won ability to continuously build and rebuild trust in their relationship with their voice in the face of the industry's most formidable challenges, aligning with observations that musicians' artistic identity is particularly vulnerable when the voice is compromised (Forbes et al., 2024).

### *Everyone's Replaceable: The Normalization of Silence, Power Imbalance, and Trauma*

According to these women, sexism in the Broadway industry is not a subtle undercurrent but an open wound. It has silenced them, forcing them to remain quiet for fear of jeopardizing their careers. Notably, the interviewer never raised the topic, yet it emerged in every interview, unprompted. Thalia described working on one Broadway show as "traumatic for so many reasons" and shared that speaking out about racism and the exploitation of women had harmed her career. She recounted being directed to physically expose herself in a way that felt deeply uncomfortable. "What are you supposed to do?" she asked. Though she wanted to object, she reflected, "You think you're making a point, but really, you're just shooting yourself in the foot." She reflected that women are expected to endure quietly because they've been taught that "humility is such a virtue," and the unfortunate reality is that "speaking out often results in lost work." Sylvia shared a similar dilemma during an audition with a renowned director who was extraordinarily cruel: "I remember very distinctly thinking, I could tell this person what I really think of them right now, or I can work again. Those were my choices." Helena recalled a director who berated her relentlessly without provocation: "I couldn't stop crying... I was just crying, and crying, and

crying. I went home on the subway crying. It was crazy.” Even years later, she admitted, “I think about that a lot.” For Selene, the connection between psychological trauma and vocal health became clear. While facing vocal difficulties during a show, she recognized they were “closely related to the trauma that was associated with the show and being in that environment six days a week.” She described her time in that production as “always in trauma response.” Two years later, she reflected that “all of us are still processing” what had happened in that toxic setting.

The safeguards to prevent these types of experiences do not appear to be effective. “What the fuck does a hotline do?” Sylvia asked bitterly, criticizing the Actors’ Equity Union’s limited efforts. She described sexual harassment as “beyond rampant” and said the industry rewards abusive behavior: “There’s no intervention. There’s no HR.” Women are expected to protect one another, but Rhea pointedly asked, “Where are the men standing up for women?” Fortunately, Rhea’s role in the industry has changed over time. “Now, I know how to wield that power for everyone else,” she said. “Now that I’m an established performer, people in power listen to me and don’t think I’m a bitch. For years, you were problematic if you did it, but now I’m in a position to advocate for others.” Reflecting on her early career, she recalls with disbelief and frustration how casting directors dismissed her as “too put together.” To appease egos, she began strategically downplaying her intelligence, playing a caricature of someone less competent. “It became a great phase in my life when I said, ‘I’m not playing fucking dumb anymore.’ But I had to, I really had to do that to get some of those jobs.”

Sylvia shared that motherhood presented its own barrier. “This is not an industry, even in our union, that has any interest in supporting working moms.” She was denied childcare assistance by men, while women quietly paid her out of pocket. Touring became impossible when she wasn’t offered housing. “So if you decide you want to have a family, there’s this whole other obstacle that nobody really gives a shit about.” She summarized the hypocrisy: “We support everyone—except for breeders.”

For these women, the industry’s persistent message that “everyone is replaceable” creates a devastating paradox—the very voices celebrated *on stage* are systematically silenced *off stage*, revealing how institutional power undermines the artistic integrity of singers and their dignity as human beings.

## Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of female Broadway singers, examining the technical, psychological, and contextual factors that shape their practice. Findings indicated that singers drew on embodied and instinctual approaches rather than relying solely on formal technical frameworks. Vocal strategies such as mix were discussed in relation to broader pressures, including vocal health, industry demands, systemic workplace challenges, and the

realities of sustained professional performance. These findings highlight how technical practices intersect with psychological experience and professional resilience.

Considered through the lens of SDT, participants’ accounts highlighted how their vocal practices, alongside broader artistic and professional experiences, shaped their motivation and well-being. The remaining discussion unpacks the motivational dynamics of singers and the thematic findings in relation to the three fundamental psychological needs underpinning SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

### *How Autonomy Shapes Motivation and Enhances Performer Well-Being*

Participants’ experiences highlight how intuitive and embodied singing reinforces their sense of creative autonomy, an essential driver of intrinsic motivation and well-being.

For these participants, developing flexibility in their voices, primarily through the use of mix, was described as essential to navigating their craft on their own terms, affirming ownership and authenticity in their artistry. Their vocal choices are not merely learned techniques but instinctively drawn from emotional memory and artistic instinct—*lived experiences* rather than rehearsed responses. Their sense of ownership extends beyond performance, influencing how they navigate their professional lives with autonomy and a sense of agency. By favoring intuitive approaches, resisting pressures to conform to appease others, advocating for peers, and refusing to let others determine their worth as performers, they prioritize self-endorsed goals over external approval. These choices help them remain grounded in their artistic values, in the principles that shape what they create, how they create it, and why it holds meaning for them.

The participants’ resilience in the face of adversity underscores the critical role of personal agency in fostering psychological well-being. Setbacks are a common feature of the musical theatre industry for performers of all genders; however, this study’s accounts from women highlight how gendered dynamics can intensify those challenges. By refusing to be defined by such setbacks, they demonstrate how reclaiming their narrative helps them withstand the demands of a profession that is both artistically rewarding and psychologically taxing. Their belief in their ability to shape their futures, bolstered by their command of vocal mix, aligns with SDT’s emphasis on self-determination as a key factor in overcoming difficulty. Driven by passion and self-expression, not by the need for outside approval, they exemplify how autonomy sustains motivation and creative vitality.

The experiences of these performers also highlight the significant constraints on autonomy within the industry, where they are often unable to assert control over their own circumstances. The forced silence around racism and

sexism reflects how power imbalances restrict their agency, while the lack of support for working mothers underscores how gendered norms suppress their autonomy. Similarly, the need to downplay their intellect underscores the industry's pressure to conform, forcing them to appease those in power and limiting their ability to express their true selves. These experiences highlight the ongoing tension between the performers' desire for autonomy and the external pressures that limit it, showing how, even in a field that values creative expression, personal agency is often constrained by the industry's structures and expectations.

### *Competence, Confidence, and Artistic Connection*

Participants associated their vocal mix with feelings of competence and intrinsic satisfaction that supported their professional performance. Confidence in their abilities fostered self-motivation and helped them withstand the frequent rejection typical of musical theatre. They linked their sense of mastery to vocal reliability and expressive control, with mix described as an important element situated within a broader set of skills that sustained long-term success.

The benefits of their expertise, however, extend beyond the stage. The connection these singers have to the art form of musical theatre reveals its therapeutic dimension, with their ability to perform serving as a stabilizing force during personal challenges. For many participants, confidence arises not only from performance but from their capacity to guide and support others. Almost all described the fulfillment they experience as teachers, grounded in the assurance that their knowledge and skill genuinely foster their students' growth (see also Forbes et al., 2025). Participants' sense of mastery is often affirmed through the emotional impact of their voice, particularly in moments when they have moved, healed, or meaningfully reached others.

The artistry of singers functions not only as a professional asset but as a source of resilience, reinforcing their well-being and sense of purpose both on and off the stage. This deep connection to their craft makes vocal injuries uniquely devastating, not just because they are unable to sing, but because their voices are so intricately tied to their existence as performers (Forbes et al., 2024, 2025). Their accounts of experiencing uncontrollable panic due to vocal unpredictability reveal how vocal dysfunction can profoundly undermine their confidence and sense of self, affecting this specific cohort in a manner not previously explored in the existing literature. Further threats to their sense of competence are embedded in the realities of professional musical theatre. Unpredictable job opportunities, toxic work environments, and industry volatility undermine performers' ability to maintain a stable sense of mastery. These factors erode the intrinsic motivation that typically stems from feeling technically and professionally secure, further exacerbating the emotional and psychological challenges they face.

In light of the obstacles they have shared, one may well ask why these performers remain in a field marked by so much uncertainty. We contend that their sustained commitment is driven by the confidence that stems from basic psychological need satisfaction, which outweighs the instability and emotional demands of the profession. It is not the pursuit of external recognition or validation that drives them but a deep belief in their skills and the fulfillment they derive from their craft—hallmarks of autonomous motivation. However, their experiences reveal how easily a sense of competence can be shaken in unsupportive environments, underscoring the urgent need for working conditions that safeguard physical, vocal, and emotional well-being across the theatre industry.

### *Relatedness and the Actor's Connection*

While relatedness is typically associated with connection to others or a broader community, in this context, it also includes how singers relate to their own voices and to the characters they portray. Participants described a range of vocal practices as tools for artistic control and emotional connection, expanding their expressive range and enabling them to embody characters more authentically. In this way, vocal technique was described as one means of bridging performer, character, and audience, enriching the interpersonal dimensions of their artistry.

While this ability plays a significant role, relatedness extends beyond technique, permeating their artistic identity. Many performers described their craft as an act of empathy, where stepping into a character's emotional world fostered empathetic compassion both on and off the stage. Developing a character was seen as a process that nurtures emotional awareness, extending empathy not only to fictional roles but also to fellow humans. For most of these performers, this deep emotional engagement became central to their sense of self as artists and individuals. The work not only connected them to others but, in many cases, to their own humanity. However, when their sense of connection was disrupted, the effects were often profound. Vocal instability or professional isolation could fracture what had once been a strong sense of relatedness. The voice, once a reliable tool for expression and connection, could become a source of alienation. In these moments, the erosion of relatedness threatened not just their emotional well-being but also their sense of professional identity.

These performers' sense of relatedness is often undermined by composers and creative teams who disregard the natural limitations of the human voice, pushing singers to perform material that prioritizes vocal range over emotional depth. As a result, singers are left to confront these challenges on their own, fostering feelings of fear, inadequacy, and isolation. Environments driven by unrealistic expectations erode the collaborative spirit and weaken performers' connection to their work. Cultural dynamics within the industry further undermine performers' sense of community.

Participants described a pervasive culture of silence and fear, particularly affecting women, which stifles genuine connection and mutual support. The absence of advocacy, particularly from men in positions of power, was seen as a systemic failure in providing adequate care. The emotional toll of being expected to support others while receiving little in return highlights how unequal emotional labor can erode communal bonds. Even practical challenges, such as the lack of support for working mothers, reveal how institutional neglect can gradually diminish a performer's sense of connection to others and to the profession itself.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings of this study illuminate how technical vocal mastery cannot be separated from the broader professional and personal contexts that shape artists' experiences. It is important to acknowledge, however, the limitations of a small-scale, fully qualitative study using IPA that foregrounds subjective experience. It is possible that another participant group may well be equally successful and confident *without* the ability to sing in mix. However, for participants in this study, the Broadway mix was described as both an artistic tool and a survival mechanism within a demanding and sometimes exploitative landscape. While participants shared sources of resilience and motivation, they also revealed persistent barriers, including industry complicity in harmful workplace practices, unrealistic vocal demands, silencing around racism and sexism, and the emotional toll of vocal loss. These factors hinder the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and are not exclusive to the theatre industry. Similar challenges have been documented across professions, reflecting a wider failure to support psychological conditions necessary for well-being and high performance.

While many countries have addressed psychosocial hazards at work, the United States lags behind, with stress, burnout, and poor mental health reaching epidemic levels (Dobson, 2023). Nations such as France, Germany, Denmark, Australia, Canada, and the UK have implemented policies promoting psychological well-being, including regulations on harassment, bullying, and work-life balance. In contrast, the US lacks a federal mandate, leaving workers, including performers, vulnerable to growing emotional strain and its impact on both health and performance (Schulte et al., 2024; Sutherland et al., 2023).

Further, Positive Psychology Interventions—evidence-based strategies for enhancing well-being—offer a practical and accessible framework for supporting performer health. These practices are cost-effective, easy to implement, and effective across diverse populations, making them well-suited to the demands of artistic environments (Ascenso et al., 2022).

These findings reinforce previous research that suggests that optimal performance and career longevity are more likely when training environments support both physical

and psychological wellness. Voice teachers, coaches, and musical directors should recognize that developing vocal strategies, such as mix, may serve not only as a technical skill but also as a psychological anchor. For these performers, vocal mastery leads to the fulfillment of basic psychological needs of autonomy, confidence, and connection. Vocal injury, then, should be understood as both a physiological and a psychological event, with the potential to disrupt not only employment but also the performer's world, existentially (see also Forbes et al., 2024).

This research supports a broader call to focus on the voices of elite performers. Too often, studies overlook those with the most refined skills and experiential insights. By engaging with artists at the top of their field, future research can more effectively inform pedagogical, clinical, and industry practices, grounded in the lived realities of the performers who sustain the art form at its highest level.

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All participants provided written informed consent for publication, including consent for their anonymized data to be included in this article. They were informed that the article may be published on an open access basis and would be freely available to anyone with an internet connection. No incentives were provided for participation.

## Consent to Participate

All participants provided written informed consent to take part in the study, including consent to publish the findings. No photos or identifying images were collected or used. All participant data have been anonymized to protect privacy.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to their personal and contextually specific content. Any inquiries regarding the data for this study should be directed by email to the first author.

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